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Altered States: Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and
Shakespeare's Dramatic Genres

CYRUS HOY

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* tell of spectacular changes worked upon human bodies in moments of extremity. The changes may represent punishments visited upon mortals by angry deities; they may serve as drastic rescues, aimed at delivering mortals from some impending danger; they may amount to deliverances from the sorrow and the pain of life. The metamorphosed shapes become part of nature: flowers, trees, birds, animals, insects, rocks, and — when occasion warrants — heavenly bodies. A powerful dynamism runs through all the tales in Ovid's poem. People are driven by whatever force has them in its power (or would seek to have them in its power) until they have reached the limits of their own endurance, or until the arrogance or the irreverence that they exhibit exceeds the limits of the god's tolerance; whereupon an end is decisively decreed to the old form of being which is now no longer tolerable to him or her who possesses it, or no longer acceptable to the powers that be. A new form — animate or inanimate — is decreed. In Ovid, the story usually stops here. The altered shape is absorbed into nature, or mixes forever with the elements, "rolled round in earth's diurnal course," as Wordsworth would say, and there we leave it.

The metamorphoses that Shakespeare's principal characters undergo mark the crucial stages along the way to their dramatic fates. Here the transformations are spiritual and psychological, not physical as in Ovid. Shakespearean characters continue, for a time at least, to function in their altered states in the company of other men and

women. The point of contact between Ovid and Shakespeare that I want to explore in this paper is both poets' fascination with the fact of human nature's susceptibility to alteration: with the fact that an individual can be transformed into a nature so different from his or her original one as to be virtually unrecognizable. The powers of transformation in Ovid are basically external; in Shakespeare they are essentially internal. Ovid is primarily concerned with accounts of material transformations of a person's physical appearance; the emphasis in Shakespeare is on the no less spectacular transformations that can take place in a person's character: in his emotional attitudes, his motives, his vision of his world and his mode of perceiving those close to him in it. Shakespeare's familiarity with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is well established, and his use of the poem is evident from the beginning to the end of his career: from the redaction of "the tragic tale of Philomel" in the story of the ravished and mutilated Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*, where Ovid's book is brought on stage (in IV. i), to the adaptation of Medea's incantation (*Met.* VII) for Prospero's valediction to the spirits in the last act of *The Tempest*. But I am less concerned in this paper with specific Shakespearean allusions to the *Metamorphoses* than I am with Shakespeare's adaptation of the dynamics of Ovidian physical transformations to the dynamics of the emotional transformations that impel his characters to their comic, or their tragic, or their romantic ends.

Transformations in the comedies are of a merry sort, and occur in an atmosphere of festive gaiety. They always have reference to love: either to the changes love makes in the feelings of the lover, or to the disguises he or she (like Ovid's gods) must assume in order to gain the beloved. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, Berowne in his tree looks down on, first, the King, then Longaville, and then Dumaine as each, thinking himself to be alone, reads his declaration of love. He confronts the three of them with fine indignation for their violation of the oath they all have sworn to forego the company of women while they devote themselves to their studies. What a falling off he has witnessed. He runs through a catalogue of embarrassing metamorphoses:

To see a king transformed to a gnat!
 To see great Hercules whipping a gig,
 And profound Salomon to tune a jig,
 And Nestor play at push-pin with the boys,
 And critic Timon laugh at idle toys

(IV. iii. 164-68)¹

When Berowne himself is exposed as one more lover, he confesses his guilt, and they all enthusiastically forget about their oath.

The design of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is controlled by the changes that overtake the two young men of the title. Valentine at the outset views love with scorn and prefers to travel to advance his education. Proteus prefers to stay at home for the sake of his beloved Julia, who, he reports in soliloquy, has "metamorphos'd" him (I. i. 66): made him neglect his studies, lose his time, "War with good counsel, set the world at nought." But in the event, it is Valentine, once he has met Silvia, who proves the faithful lover, while Proteus (true to his name) reveals himself a master of change by forgetting Julia once he has seen Silvia. Love's symmetry is thus balanced in the latter half of the play while Silvia is wooed by two lovers and Julia is deserted. The balance is only restored when Julia resorts to what she terms "a disguise of love" (V. iv. 107): the page-boy masquerade by means of which she wins back her strayed lover.

The symmetry of lovers undergoes even more radical disturbance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Both young men, Lysander and Demetrius, love Hermia (and she loves Lysander), but neither loves Helena (though she loves Demetrius). In the middle scenes of the play, when Puck has botched Oberon's effort to balance the symmetry of lovers, Lysander and Demetrius both woo Helena, and Hermia is deserted. Finally, Lysander's affection is restored to Hermia, while Demetrius' eyes (doctored by the juice of Oberon's flower) remain true to Helena.

In all these early comedies, some sort of doctoring, some degree of alteration in a character's vision or temperament, is necessary if love is to gain the day. The most flamboyant example is perhaps Petruchio's reformation of Katherina in *The Taming of the Shrew*. A subtler version of this comic metamorphosis comes in the later *Much Ado About Nothing*, with the transformation of Beatrice and Benedick from noisy wranglers to lovers. Shakespeare's most farcical treatment of the alterations love requires in order to encompass its design comes in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. When, in the last act, Falstaff arrives at Herne's oak for his assignation with Mrs. Ford, wearing the stipulated horns of a deer, he see himself in a great mythological tradition:

Now the hot-blooded gods assist me! Remember Jove, thou wast a

¹ All quotations from Shakespeare's plays in the present paper are from the *Riverside Shakespeare* (Textual Editor, G. Blakemore Evans, Boston 1974).

bull for thy Europa, love set on thy horns. O powerful love, that in some respects makes a beast a man; in some other, a man a beast. You were also, Jupiter, a swan for the love of Leda. O omnipotent love, how near the god drew to the complexion of a goose! (V. v. 1. ff.)

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Jessica takes on boy's disguise in order to escape from the house of her father, Shylock, and go off with her lover, Lorenzo. Cupid, she says, would blush to see her thus transformed (II. vi. 38-39). Portia and her maid Nerissa disguise themselves as young men (a lawyer and his clerk, respectively) in order to save the friend of Portia's husband from Shylock's legal processes (and incidentally to test the truth of their men). Rosalind uses her male disguise in *As You Like It* as a covert means of getting to know Orlando, and of winning his love. Viola's male disguise in *Twelfth Night* places her in the delicate role of intermediary between the man she loves and the woman he loves. The imbroglio that threatens when Olivia scorns the Duke's love in favor of the disguised Viola-Caesario is an extended and refined version of the equally impossible passion that causes the haughty shepherdess Phebe to scorn her true love, Silvius, in favor of Rosalind disguised as Ganymede, in *As You Like It*. In the case of Viola, disguise lands her in a romantic limbo; she can neither affirm her love for the Duke, nor rid herself of Olivia's unwelcome infatuation. The only solution is to provide a male version of Viola for Olivia, and one is conveniently at hand in Viola's twin brother. He serves to round out the quartet of lovers in *Twelfth Night*, just as Orlando's formerly wicked brother Oliver suddenly appears in the Forest of Arden near the end of *As You Like It*, miraculously reformed, to provide a husband for Celia.

Shakespeare's work in comedy culminates in *Twelfth Night*. Viewed collectively, the comedies prior to this one provide a full repertoire of the guises under which love appears, the devices to be employed in securing it, the transformations it works on lover and beloved. Lovers in the comedies that follow *Twelfth Night* assume more disturbingly altered shapes than any that we have previously witnessed. The sense of Viola in a romantic limbo in the central scenes of *Twelfth Night* deepens in a play like *All's Well that Ends Well* where Helena, after she has been abandoned by her husband, becomes — and remains until virtually the end of the play — “but the shadow of a wife . . . The name and not the thing” (V. iii. 307-08). She has a counter-part in the figure of Mariana in *Measure for Measure*, abandoned by Angelo to whom she was betrothed and so a decidedly equivocal figure in the eyes of society (neither maid, widow, nor

wife); thus her life of retirement at her moated grange. Angelo in this play is Shakespeare's Pentheus (the Pentheus of Euripides' *Bacchae* or of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book III), though in Angelo's case it is the rites, not of Bacchus, which he denies, but of Venus. He is a model of male continence until his austere gaze falls on the chaste Isabella, and then his repressed sexuality comes violently to the surface in one of Shakespeare's most extraordinary confrontations: extraordinary for the perverse manner in which the effect of Isabella's virtue on the puritanical Angelo incites him to lust. The metamorphosis of Angelo from puritan to sensualist, from dignified administrator of the law to exposed lecher, is the source of the play's most impressive dramatic movement.

The transformations that love brings, as these are presented in Shakespeare's purest comedies, are gently worked and entirely pleasing. Such stresses and strains as they occasion are in themselves exhilarating; and the principal effect of love's metamorphoses in Shakespearean comedy is immense satisfaction at the emancipation from singleness: at the release of self into union with another. In Shakespeare's comedies, the metamorphoses that love accomplishes are worked out in terms of the relationship of the lovers themselves and their surrounding society; they are conducted in an ambiance of good humor, good sense, and witty contrivance. In treating of the altered states occasioned by the experience of Shakespearean tragedy, we find ourselves focussing on the moments of extremity which are common to all Ovidian transformations: characters in the tragedies suddenly find themselves in the presence of something — an event, a disclosure — that will transform the terms of their existence; henceforth, things will never be the same, nor will they. We see this tendency to concentrate the essence of the transforming experience into a moment of intense confrontation beginning in those satiric and problematic comedies that Shakespeare seems to have written just after *Twelfth Night*. Angelo's confrontation with Isabella, with its devastating consequences for his moral integrity, is an example. So is the scene in the last act of *Troilus and Cressida* when Troilus witnesses Cressida at her rendezvous with Diomed, realizes her faithlessness, realizes as well how naive his trust in her has been, and is transformed into the despairing, bloody-minded figure striding across the fields of battle seeking revenge in the play's last scenes.

The desire for revenge is prominent in Ovid's tales of metamorphosis; violated mortals pursue it no less than outraged deities. It is a recurrent motive to tragedy in Shakespeare, and not simply in *Hamlet*, though that is the most celebrated example. Hamlet's encounter with the ghost constitutes one of those moments of extremity

out of which metamorphosed states issue; he is never afterwards the same, and everybody in the play is promptly talking about the change that has come over him. The first description of him we have after the encounter comes from Ophelia, and in it he resembles nothing so much as another ghost: his look

so piteous in purport
As if he had been loosed out of hell
To speak of horrors. . . . (II. i. 79-81)

But his principal mission is not to bring news from hell but (following the ghost's injunction) to seek revenge, which for one reason or another is what nearly all of Shakespeare's tragic protagonists seek. Iago, for his own obscure reasons, hates Othello, and it is not the least diabolical aspect of Iago's manipulations that he manages to infect Othello with a corresponding hatred for Desdemona. Hatred breeds a passion for vengeance in each case. As the agent of Othello's metamorphosis, Iago notes with satisfaction how his insinuations concerning Desdemona are having their effect: "The Moor already changes with my poison," he says (*Othello* III. iii. 325), and we witness the measure of the change later in the same scene when Othello calls Iago to witness that all his "fond love" for his wife is gone. He then launches an infernal invocation:

Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell!
Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne
To tyrannous hate! Swell, bosom, with thy fraught,
For 'tis of aspics' tongues! (III. iii. 447-450)

The summons to love to yield its place to vengeance may be taken as an emblem of the opposing impulses that animate, respectively, Shakespearean comedy and tragedy, and which preside over the transformation worked upon the principals in each genre. The informing experience for tragic figures in Shakespeare is to look on something that is, for them, unimaginably terrible: some equivalent to a Gorgon's head. As a result, they are figuratively turned to stone, the power of feeling killed in them. Shakespeare has an early, uncomplicated example of this in the figure (not fully a tragic one) of Young Clifford, who at the end of *Henry VI, Part 2*, comes upon the corpse of his father, slain by Richard of York, and thereupon announces:

Even at this sight
My heart is turn'd to stone; and while 'tis mine,
It shall be stony. (VI. ii. 49-51)

Henceforth, he says, he will have nothing to do with pity; if he meet an infant of the house of York he will cut it "Into as many gobbets" as Medea did to the body of her young brother, Absyrtus. Early in 3 *Henry VI*, he carries out this pledge when he ruthlessly kills York's young son, Rutland.

The protagonist of *Timon of Athens* is a more complex product of this basic sort of confrontation with the terrible. What the death of his father at the hands of his enemies is to Young Clifford, the ingratitude of the Athenians whom he believed to be his friends is to Timon. The play's two halves show us, respectively, Timon in his prosperity when his generosity is boundless and he holds the most confident views of human benevolence; and Timon in adversity when those whom he has thought to be his friends desert him in his need, and he retires to the woods, firm in his conviction that there "he shall find / Th' unkindest beast more kinder than mankind" (IV. i. 35-36). His misanthropy persists to the end of his life, and his end presents one of Shakespeare's nearest approximations to an Ovidian metamorphosis: there is a sense in which Timon, in the extremity of his recoil from human society, dissolves into the elements. He prepares his grave, what he terms

his everlasting mansion
Upon the beached verge of the salt flood,
Who once a day with his embossed froth
The turbulent surge shall cover. . . (V. i. 215-18)

His tomb is duly found where he has said it would be, symbolically situated in the context of its surrounding elements. Alcibiades, when he hears of the site of Timon's grave and reads its inscription, can appreciate its metaphoric appropriateness. Though Timon, in the bitterness of his disenchantment with mankind, scorned human sympathy, yet, says Alcibiades,

rich conceit
Taught thee to make vast Neptune weep for aye
On thy low grave . . . (V. iv. 77-79)

Timon's shattering confrontation with human ingratitude has often been compared to Lear's, and there are certainly similarities in the speeches of bitter denunciation which each utters when he realizes the unworthiness of those in whom he has put his trust. One of the things that makes *King Lear* a greater play than *Timon of Athens*, however, is the fact that the confrontation with ingratitude does not account for the whole of Lear's experience of the terrible. The sense of the terrible fully breaks over him when he is confronted with the

wretched Bedlamite (the disguised Edgar), asks himself the momentous question, "Is man no more than this?" (III. iv. 102-03), and goes mad. The fact of human ingratitude has, nonetheless, a crucial share in rendering the sight of Poor Tom so shocking to Lear. Ingratitude in *King Lear* first takes the face of Goneril (I. iv), to be joined a few scenes later by the face of Regan (II. iv). From the outset it is conceived as something monstrous; Lear personifies it as a "marble-hearted fiend," more hideous than the sea monster when it manifests itself in one's own child (I. iv. 259-61). As always in Shakespearean tragedy, the sense of injury issues in a call for revenge. When the passion for revenge is upon Lear, he advises Nature concerning the kind of affliction that might appropriately be visited on Goneril:

Hear, Nature, hear, dear goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful. (I. iv. 275-77)

If she must give birth,

Create her child of spleen, that it may live
And be a thwart disnatur'd torment to her.

And this,

that she may feel
How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child!

By the time Regan has joined forces with Goneril, Lear is prepared to take revenge into his own hands, but he is powerless, and his sense of outrage can issue only in the grotesque fantasy that brings the daughters to the mock-arraignment that he conducts in the hovel in his madness.

The protagonists of Shakespeare's later tragedies (*Macbeth*, *Coriolanus*, *Antony and Cleopatra*) alter in relation to their circumstances in ways not quite like any of those who have gone before. *Macbeth's* tragic consciousness is comparable to that of the Medea of Seneca or of Ovid (*Met.*, VII). He is not the kind of tragic protagonist who errs unknowingly (like Lear), or who is deceived by another (like Othello); there is no failure of self-knowledge in *Macbeth*. He could say with Ovid's Medea that desire persuades him one way, reason another; that he sees the better way and approves it, but yet follows the worse (*Met.*, VII. 19-21). Those capable of this degree of moral discrimination in Ovid are generally women. In addition to Medea, one might cite the examples of Althaea, debating whether or not to kill her son, Meleager, who has caused the death of her brothers (Book VIII);

of Procne, debating (like Medea) whether to kill her child to avenge herself on her husband (Book VI); of Myrrha, lusting for her father but fearful of the sin of incest (Book X). Perhaps this is why Lady Macbeth is so scornful of her husband's scruples, and persists throughout the first half of the play in raising unflattering queries about his manhood. But he steels himself to the deed of murder, and ultimately proves himself to be made of sterner stuff than his Lady, for all her ferocious rhetoric. Much of his strength consists in not seeing what he does; thus his fear to think what he has done once the murder of Duncan has been committed (II. ii. 48); his declaration that to know his deed, it were best not to know himself (II. ii. 70); his announcement as late as III. v concerning future plans:

Strange things I have in head, that will to hand,
Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd. (138-39)

The doubleness of this is of a piece with that contained in his appeal to the heavens before the murder:

Stars, hide your fires,
Let not light see my black and deep desires;
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see. (I. iv. 50-53)

How much he has been altered by what he has done does not permit of a simple answer. Near the end of the play he says that he has "supp'd full with horrors" and he alludes to his "slaughterous thoughts" (V. v. 13-14), but by now he is inured to them; long ago he had realized there was no turning back (III. v. 135 ff.). One reason why it is not easy to assess the extent of his change is that it is not altogether clear just how innocent he ever was to begin with. Certainly at the outset of the play he has an heroic reputation and is esteemed by his King and by his peers; but the play strongly suggests that the propensity to evil was there from the outset. His rapt response to the encounter with the witches is suggestive, and his monologues and his conversations with Lady Macbeth make it clear that crime in itself is not repugnant to him if opportunity is favorable, and if he can keep the left hand from knowing what the right hand is doing. He does what his ambition drives him to do. He never denies that it is wrong, though he would prefer not to look at his deeds too closely. He alters to the extent that he inures himself to the horrors attendant on doing what, from the outset, virtually in spite of himself, he wills himself to do.

Both Macbeth and Coriolanus present somewhat parallel cases: once they have set their course, they cannot or will not vary it, and

so in effect they decree their ruin. Coriolanus indeed is given to making a virtue of his unalterable state. Much is made in the play of his inability to be other than he is. He cannot pretend, he cannot compromise; he is always himself, always the same. Ideally, this defines a high personal integrity (the motto of Queen Elizabeth I, we remember, was *semper eadem*). As an ideal, this lofty adherence to an undeviating code of personal honor is admirable; put into practice, the rigid behavior that issues from such a code is disastrous, as the play demonstrates with great clarity and deliberation, and considerable irony. We applaud Coriolanus for sternly eschewing the hypocrisy which Roman political life demands; yet a little hypocrisy would have saved him; and it is a caution to watch him preserve his honor by becoming a traitor. Rome banishes him — or, as he would have it, he banishes Rome — whereupon he goes straightway to the enemies of Rome, the Volscians, his thoughts bent on revenge. He finds nothing inconsistent in his leadership of the Volscian armies against Rome. The vulgar Roman populace rejected him; he turned his back on the place and went elsewhere, his honor and integrity intact. He serves the Volscian military endeavors as steadfastly as he had previously served the Roman ones. It is only when his mother, his wife and his child appear to him with a plea to spare his native city that his steadfastness collapses. The moment heralds an immensely poignant metamorphosis, as his natural feelings clamor for expression and he struggles to suppress them:

My wife comes foremost; then the honor'd mould
Wherein this trunk was fram'd, and in her hand
The grandchild to her blood. But out, affection,
All bond and privilege of nature, break!
Let it be virtuous to be obstinate.
What is that curtsy worth? or those doves' eyes,
Which can make gods forsworn? I melt, and am not
Of stronger earth than others. My mother bows,
As if Olympus to a molehill should
In supplication nod; and my young boy
Hath an aspect of intercession, which
Great Nature cries, "Deny not." Let the Volscies
Plough Rome and harrow Italy, I'll never
Be such a gosling to obey instinct, but stand
As if a man were author of himself,
And knew no other kin. (V. ii. 22-37)

The upshot of the long interview that follows is his yielding to his mother's intercession; the Volscian armies will turn back and Rome

will be spared. But his uncharacteristic reversal of himself will be fatal for him, as he knows.

Coriolanus' deflection from his stony resolve for vengeance on Rome is exceptional. Affections are more often sacrificed to vengeance in Shakespearean tragedy. The example of *Coriolanus* has an interesting parallel in the other tragedy that Shakespeare wrote around the same time, *Antony and Cleopatra*. As that play enters its final phase, Antony, convinced that Cleopatra has betrayed him to Caesar, is swearing horrendous vengeance on her. This is a moment of extremity of the kind in which Ovid's *Metamorphoses* deal. Antony, in *extremis*, alludes appropriately to Ovid's account (*Met.*, IX) of the suffering and final passion of the god Hercules, whom the play has already informed us Antony loved. He cries out after Cleopatra has left the scene:

The shirt of Nessus is upon me; teach me,
Alcides, thou mine ancestor, thy rage.
Let me lodge Lichas on the horns o'th' moon,
And with those hands, that grasp'd the heaviest club,
Subdue my worthiest self. The witch shall die.
To the young Roman boy she hath sold me, and I fall
Under this plot. She dies for't. (IV. xii. 43-49)

Cleopatra reports to her women in a rush of Ovidian allusions:

O, he's more mad
Than Telamon for his shield; the boar of Thessaly
Was never so emboss'd. (IV. xiii. 1-3)

Under pressure of the fury produced by his sense of betrayal and defeat, he is disintegrating, as the play informs us when the scene shifts back to him in a passage of which the subject is changing shapes, here figured forth in the clouds that constantly re-form themselves from one moment to the next. Antony addresses his attendant, Eros:

Sometimes we see a cloud that's dragonish,
A vapor sometime like a bear or lion,
A tower'd citadel, a pendant rock,
A forked mountain, or blue promontory
With trees upon't that nod unto the world,
And mock our eyes with air. Thou hast seen these signs,
They are black vesper's pageants. . . .
That which is now a horse, even with a thought
The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct
As water is in water. (IV. xiv. 2-11)

He himself, he announces, is

Even such a body. Here I am Antony,
Yet cannot hold this visible shape . . . (13-14)

He speaks of his previous commitment to Cleopatra, rages at the way she has "pack'd cards with Caesar's," swears she will "die the death," when word comes that she *is* dead. Antony's rage dissolves. "Unarm, Eros," he says to his attendant; "the long day's task is done, / And we must sleep"; and he promptly sets about plans for overtaking Cleopatra in his own death:

. . . I come, my queen! . . . Stay for me!
Where souls do couch on flowers, we'll hand in hand,
And with our sprightly port make the ghosts gaze.
Dido and her Aeneas shall want troops,
And all the haunt be ours. (IV. xiv. 50-54)

But Cleopatra, as the audience knows, is not yet in the other world; she is still in this one, the news of her death having been merely a trick to gain time until Antony's wrath has run its course. Antony, however, does not know this, and like another Pyramus, rashly jumping to conclusions at the sight of Thisbe's blood-stained scarf, he kills himself. Or rather, he tries to do so; the intended sword thrust misses its mark, and he is fatally wounded but still alive when Cleopatra's second messenger comes on to report the truth, that Cleopatra yet lives. Antony is not disturbed by the knowledge of her previous deception. He does not even allude to it. He merely asks to be taken to her, that he may die in her arms; and this, after much heaving on the part of the attendants as his body is hauled aloft to Cleopatra in her monument (she is afraid to come down lest she be taken captive by Caesar), is done. There are many things to wonder at in the last 800 lines of *Antony and Cleopatra* (from IV. xii to the end of the play), but among the most wonderful is the way in which Shakespeare transforms the impulse to vengeance to the impulse of love: transforms, in effect, the impulse to tragedy to the impulse of comedy (comedy, let it be understood in this case, of a resplendent kind). This is characteristic of a play which, throughout its course, has been all shifting alternation between opposing poles — of duty and pleasure, of reason and sensuality — subsumed under the opposition of Rome and Egypt. As for the two principal characters, change is the medium through which they define themselves. Their repertoire of forms seems inexhaustible; they could presumably go on ringing changes on them indefinitely. When circumstances make this unfeasible, they translate themselves to another sphere, and in doing so, define themselves for all time in their mutual relationship. The dying Antony has anticipated the sensation they will create when

they appear together in the realm of the dead (their "sprightly port" will "make the ghosts gaze"). Cleopatra's anticipation of her reunion with Antony, and the metamorphosis that will make that possible, is even more impressive. She has "immortal longings" in her. She urges her waiting woman to hasten in the work of adorning her with robe and crown:

Yare, yare, good Iras; quick. Methinks I hear
 Antony call: I see him rouse himself
 To praise my noble act. I hear him mock
 The luck of Caesar, which the gods give men
 To excuse their after wrath. Husband, I come!
 Now to that name my courage prove my title!
 I am fire and air; my other elements
 I give to baser life. (V. ii. 283-90)

The replacement of the impulse to vengeance with the impulse to love, together with the so subtly sophisticated mingling of tragic and comic attitudes and gestures in the finale of *Antony and Cleopatra*, heralds the full-scale intermingling of these opposing elements in the romances that Shakespeare wrote at the end of his career. Altered states are the very stuff of these last plays. Husbands are transformed by jealous rages to thoughts of murderous revenge, only to recognize the unworthiness of their suspicions and to repent of the misery they have caused (as in the cases of Posthumus in *Cymbeline* and Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*); those supposed dead are restored to life (Thaisa in *Pericles*, Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*); evil-doers confess their evil (Iachimo in *Cymbeline*, Alonzo in *The Tempest*). What chiefly alters the conditions of characters in these plays is the restoration of lost loved ones: wives (as in *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale*), daughters (as in those same three plays), sons (as in *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest*). Always of pre-eminent thematic importance is the transformation of the urge to vengeance to the capacity to love; this achieves its apotheosis in *The Tempest*, when Prospero recognizes that vengeance is transcended by a rarer quality, mercy.

The emphasis in all four of these last plays on forgiveness and mercy, on the need to bear sufferings patiently, and on the happy issue out of all afflictions that informs the repeated ritual of their endings: all of these qualities have caused the religious signification of these final romances to be stressed by many critics. The religious implications are certainly there, and Christian doctrine is echoed at many points, but these plays would not be what they are without the literature of classical Greece and Rome. Shakespeare's late romances display in rich concentration the debt to classical literature that is on

exhibit at least to some degree in all his work. Specifically, there is the sophisticated mythology for which Ovid's *Metamorphoses* would have been Shakespeare's principal source. This informs the poetic imagery throughout the texts of all four of the last plays. It also furnishes the materials for the chief spectacles of the four: the epiphanies that comprise the climax of *Pericles* (in the vision of Diana) and of *Cymbeline* (Jupiter's appearance in Posthumus' dream vision), the pastoral scene with Autolycus and the sheepshearers and the dance of the twelve satyrs in *The Winter's Tale*, the masque featuring Iris and Ceres and Juno in *The Tempest*. Shakespeare is indebted to Greek and Roman literature for his sense of the classical pastoral tradition, which finds expression not only in the fourth act of *The Winter's Tale*, but in the scenes in the Welsh mountains in *Cymbeline*, to say nothing of the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It* of the previous decade. His debt to classical literature in the last plays must, finally, include his use of story materials from the Greek romances (particularly the *Aethiopica* of Heliodorus, and the *Clitophon and Leucippe* of Achilles Tatius), and from Plautine comedy: not the farcical Plautus of the *Menaechmi*, but the more serious, the more romantic Plautus of plays like the *Captivi* and the *Rudens*.

How closely the narrative materials of the Greek romances resemble the stories of saints' lives as related in such collections as *The Golden Legend* has been demonstrated by such a recent critic as Howard Felperin.² It is not difficult to see how stories stressing the virtues of patience and forgiveness, and celebrating the reunion of loved ones after long separation, could serve as vehicles for demonstrating the rewards of faith, the benevolence of God's providence. Nor should it be difficult to see how the spectacular changes (for better and for worse) described in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* could accord with the humanistic spirit of an age which placed such emphasis on man's free power to make and mold himself: "to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are brutish," or "to be reborn into higher forms, which are divine."³ The mythological resonances of Ovid's tales, the pagan mysteries that also affirm eternal psychological truths and which are adumbrated in these tales: these are the qualities that enabled Shakespeare to dramatize the transformations of human character and not simply to allegorize them. Ovid and the other great classical authors whom he knew (Virgil, Plautus, Terence,

² In *Shakespearean Romance* (Princeton 1972), pp. 163-170.

³ From Pico Della Mirandola's "Oration on the Dignity of Man" (translated by Elizabeth Livermore Forbes), in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man* (edited by Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, John Herman Randall, Jr., Chicago 1948), p. 225.

Seneca) delivered him from parochialism in matters spiritual, and from provincialism in matters of the world. They also delivered him — as they did all his great contemporaries (Sidney, Spenser, Marlowe, Jonson) — from drabness in poetry.

University of Rochester